
ALLEN TATE

*The Unliteral Imagination;
Or, I, too, Dislike It**

TO SAY THAT one does not like something is not to say that one hates it; it is only to say that one is indifferent to it, or wishes it weren't there, for it may occupy the space that could be filled by something that one positively likes. I, too, dislike it—I, too, along with Miss Marianne Moore, dislike poetry; that is to say, I am indifferent to most of it; and as I get older I am able to read less and less of it. I have wondered why people have been so kind as to describe me as a literary critic, or more narrowly as a critic of poetry; for I have never been able to concentrate on any poetry that could not be useful to me. A literary critic is a person who likes to read books, and even to study them; a critic of poetry, a person who likes to read poems and books of poems. Recently, in London, V. S. Pritchett said to me that he liked to read books, almost any books. I said to myself (not to him) that given his retentive memory and agile intelligence, the sheer love of reading, of reading what one dislikes, or even detests, is the first requisite of the literary critic. I have read certain poems, some of them quite long, hundreds of times; I have never been able to finish *The Ring and the Book*; I don't think that I shall read *Paradise Lost* again. I once read Middle English fairly well,

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but I could not get beyond the first hundred lines of *Piers Ploughman*.

A literary critic may, and a literary scholar *must* read everything in his "field" (dubious word) with a selfless detachment that puts historical significance above personal preference. Is a genuine scholar expected to prefer one thing to another? He is supposed to understand everything he reads as an historical document. He may prefer Dryden to Pope, but this is nobody's business but his own. I am not denigrating the literary scholars; I could ill afford to sneer at them, since I myself am a parasite dangling from a small twig of their tree of knowledge. It is difficult for me to acquire information at the source. If I wanted to know just where John Dryden was when the Dutch fleet was sailing up the Thames, I would telephone my friend Samuel H. Monk; but since I seldom need to know this sort of thing, I telephone him often for less frivolous reasons, such as the prospect of some Jack Daniel at half-past five.

I, too, dislike it; I dislike the unliteral, or roundabout imagination; for there are poems which do not say literally what they purport to talk about, just as only a few scholars ever get literally round to the text that they hold in one hand while, with the other, they thumb a political or economic "document," which may have been printed at about the same time as the text.

Having made this sweeping generalization—or this generalized sweeping out of certain poets and scholars—I had better try to decide, since I have not yet, at this point, decided, what a *literal* reading of a poem might be, or what constitutes the *literal* element in the poem itself. Here, at the beginning of this tangled difficulty, one feels a little like Moses confronting the burning bush; one is awed by it but it is too hot to jump into; for if Moses could have been like the man of our town who jumped into the bramble bush and scratched out both his eyes, he couldn't have jumped out of the burning bush and scratched them in again, because by that time the eyes along with the rest of him would have been burnt up. One must maintain a certain distance.

The first complication that one meets in confronting literalism is happily a simple one. Take that by now ancient whipping-boy, *The Road to Xanadu*, by the late John Livingston Lowes, a work cited some years

ago by Mr. T. S. Eliot as a scholarly masterpiece of its kind, one example of which, said Mr. Eliot, was enough. There are other examples to complicate a univocal view of the kind of scholarship that dredges up and arranges a poet's erudition and offers it as an explanation of the poem. Or was Professor Lowes really trying to "explain" "Kubla Khan"? If he was, he didn't succeed. I can bear witness that at least one reader knew no more about "Kubla Khan" after he had read *The Road to Xanadu* than he knew before. I have read Coleridge's account of the occasion, but that was not an explanation of the poem; Coleridge merely told us why the poem was not longer than it is. That man from Porlock—is it too late to find out his name?—is surely the most important anonymous non-literary personage in the history of English poetry. Am I right in thinking that not only Coleridge but everybody else since Coleridge has taken it for granted that "Kubla Khan" would have been better if he had not been interrupted by the man from Porlock? How can we be sure that the town of Porlock should not have a bronze plaque in memory of this anonymous benefactor of literature? In other words, how can we be sure, had Coleridge been allowed to put down on paper his entire dream, that "Kubla Khan" would not have meandered off with the sacred river into dark mazes of Coleridgean abstractions, such as he afflicted many of his other poems with?

If Coleridge could explain only the shortness of the poem, what does Professor Lowes explain? Nothing, I think; certainly nothing more than "Kubla Khan" explains about itself. What Professor Lowes did in *The Road to Xanadu* was what some great scholars, who are not mere pedants, are capable of doing: he wrote a literary masterpiece that has about the same relation to its ostensible subject as a history of Denmark has to *Hamlet*.

It is time to return from this digression to some observations that may have a bearing on the title of this discourse. If *The Road to Xanadu* has little relation to "Kubla Khan," what *has* it relation to? "Relation" is a slippery word; I wish I could proceed without calling attention to it; I must try to narrow it down to something like a precise meaning. I shall have to go about this indirectly and tentatively. It is not necessary to have read "Kubla Khan" in order to understand and enjoy *The Road*

to *Xanadu*. Professor Lowes wrote a first-rate work of the imagination which contains within it all that one needs to know in order to understand it. What *The Road to Xanadu* has "relation" to is not Coleridge's poem, but an inchoate mass (I must speak metaphorically) of reading which is obviously Coleridge's reading; and, likewise, "Kubla Khan" has "relation" to Coleridge's reading; but neither the work of Coleridge nor the work of Lowes can be said to be *about* Coleridge's reading.

So, instead of the phrase "relation to" we now have the preposition "about." What are these works about? What, in short, are their literal meanings?

Both the poem and the prose work that purports to be about the poem are products of the romantic imagination: both works are in some sense reconstructions of a past, and that sense is perhaps the neo-Gothic impulse towards the artificial ruin. I submit that Professor Lowes' book is also an artificial ruin; or perhaps the materials of an artificial ruin lying around in some disorder waiting to be assembled. Not that Professor Lowes lacked a principle to guide him in his search for the materials: this principle was simply that of historical research. He started with the images and allusions in "Kubla Khan," then tracked down as many of the books that Coleridge had read as he could find; the result was an orderly exhibit of disordered, or fragmented, details which to this day retain the only kind of meaning that they could ever have; that is to say, the form of *The Road to Xanadu* is not unlike that of an impressionist novel, in which one *progression d'effet* follows another, creating a mounting suspense which compels us to ask breathlessly: What Next? Thus Professor Lowes' book has its own form, which one might describe as autotelic; at any rate, at the end of the book we are aware that "Kubla Khan" has disappeared, and has become completely unnecessary to our understanding of *The Road to Xanadu*.

I have labored this matter unduly. I will make one more observation and proceed to my ostensible subject. Let us glance at four lines of "Kubla Khan":

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.

Professor Lowes is not helpful here; and as I think I have indicated, we should not expect him to be. To understand these lines a somewhat less ambitious undertaking than Professor Lowes' researches might be in order. At a glance, one doubts that any poet could use the rhyme *motion-ocean* except in a limerick or some other sort of doggerel. It is a cockney rhyme, and it retains an air of serious nonsense which is exactly right in a dream-poem. And what about the heavy assonances and alliterations throughout? I am not the first person to notice them. But who has noticed the synaesthetic transference of image to sound, as, in a dream, color can become sound? Although Coleridge thought of the poem as a "psychological curiosity," one must not take his word for it. The entire poem—not merely the four lines quoted—reveals the hand of a master. Yet almost all that criticism can do is the trifling sort of observation that I have just made; and though Samuel Purchas, along with Professor Lowes, has his own charms, these gentlemen have little to do with Coleridge.

The hand of a master: but of what, in this poem, was Coleridge a master? The best answer I can give is to beg the question: he was a master of the romantic imagination. I get more perverse pleasure out of this imagination than out of any other, because I too, in so far as I am a poet, am a romantic poet. But like Pope's Umbriel, I must have been in a former life a Prude, and I disapprove of what that makes me; I disapprove to the extent of wishing that I could write poems that are not gloomily difficult, or that do not offer the shock of the *nouveau frisson* which comes of the synaesthetic surprise or what an early French romantic called *sorcellerie évocatoire*. I am talking about myself, perhaps because I like the vanity of a brief association with Coleridge, but actually I think because I cannot be very different from other poets of my time, or at least of my generation; and I believe we all wish we had been able not only to write better poems, but poems that say much more than we have been able to say, while at the same time seeming to say less: the seeming to say less would consist in making the effects of shock secondary, a kind of by-product of literal statements: even simple propositions in which denoted objects are predicated of other denoted objects, or in which philosophical commonplaces are given motion in a

common experience. I shall cite certain passages—not touchstones—that seem to approximate the ideal of poetry that I have in mind; and I shall begin with Dante.

Già era, e con paura il metto in metro,
là dove l'ombre eran tutte coperte,
e trasparen come festuca in vetro.

(Already I had come (and with fear I put
it into verse) where the souls were wholly
covered, and shone through straw like glass.)

Inf. XXXIV.

The English translation is by J. A. Carlyle, and it is good; but there was no reason to translate *ombre* (shades) as “souls.” I point this out as an example of the nineteenth-century’s failure to see the importance of literal rendition, whether in translating a foreign language or in writing its own English poems. To render *ombre* as souls is to miss a dimension of meaning that Dante surely would have thought essential. In Christian theology souls—that is, dead persons—are not “shades”: Dante’s word is classical and Vergilian; and where he uses the word *ombra* he is reminding us of the continuity of the Christian Hell with Vergil’s pagan Hades. What Carlyle’s mistranslation omits is what the late Erich Auerbach called *figura*—the symbolic dimension rooted firmly in a literal image or statement that does not need the symbolic significance in order to be immediately understood. Literally Dante’s shades in Judecca *as visually apprehended* are three-dimensional bodies; we infer of them the capacity for pain, as if they were alive; and their pain, even though they are in solid ice and are thus immobile, has all the intensity of fire; but *as symbolically apprehended* they require a further implication of the literal image: if Dante had tried to touch one of them his hand would have met with no physical resistance. The entire *Divine Comedy* is a vast interior vision, an ordered, cosmic dream, peopled with visible shades that dissolve when Dante reaches out to touch them, as Casella in the *Purgatorio II* melts into air when Dante tries to embrace him. But why does Carlyle, in Canto XXXII of the *Inferno* translate *ombre* correctly as “shades”: “the doleful shades were in the ice, sounding with their teeth like storks”? Was he at liberty to

be right in one passage and wrong in another? *Ombre* always means "shades" unless we are willing to forego Dante's *figura* which tells us that we may *see* literally in the mind a non-existent object that nevertheless has *essentia* as distinguished from *existentia*. This is the capital significance of Dante's allegory. It is not an allegory which like Spenser's floats in a rarefied medium of personified abstractions; there would be no allegory at all in the *Divine Comedy* had not Dante in the first place seen, in the progression of his own drama of the mind (the phrase is Francis Fergusson's), *shades* which are analogically solid human bodies; and in the link with classical mythology we are being shown, as I have said, the continuity of all the dead, both pagan and Christian. That Dante can tell us so much in one simple word, put into a certain historical and theological context, need not surprise us; yet we may stand in awe of the poet who can do this through the simple distinction between an actual solid body and a merely visible body that does not stop the hand trying to touch it.

I should now like to offer a passage familiar to all readers of poetry in English, the first quatrain of Shakespeare's Sonnet LXXIII:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

The lines may seem a far cry from Dante. Are they not merely an extended simile, of which the vehicle and the tenor are jammed together into an unconvincing metaphor? Before I try to answer the question, I could suggest that we might do a *Road-to-Xanadu* on the fourth line, if only to show once more how irrelevant historical criticism sometimes can be. (I could not hope to write an irrelevant masterpiece like Professor Lowes!) Shakespeare—the argument runs, according to a commentator whose name I have forgotten—Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic, and he wanted to notify his fellow recusants that he was still with them. He wrote the sonnet for the sake of the fourth line: "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." The choirs are the ruined chapels of the monasteries where Compline, the last office of the day, was sung. That it was Compline there is supporting evidence in the

second quatrain: "Death's second self," sleep, follows Compline, and seals the monks up in rest. Henry VIII is therefore the remote begetter of this sonnet. In another sonnet does not Shakespeare say: "And yet this time removed was summer's time"? These were the good old days before Henry, according to Philip Hughes, had made the English people his Mystical Body.

Doubtless nonsense has a way of instructing us critically by showing what can be *uttered*, but ought not to be *said*, about poetry.

If the substitution of "soul" for "shade" by Carlyle deprives the passage from Dante of its literal base, we could easily ruin Shakespeare's sonnet by rewriting one line as Carlyle might have written it, or for that matter, as I shall indicate presently, as Shelley might have written it.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When the leaves of life in melancholy hang, etc.

Is it necessary to point out that life has no leaves? Nevertheless, my revision of the line is fairly good second-rate romantic imagery, in which the vehicle disappears into its murky tenor. The abstract meaning is plain enough, but the image is obscure because it does not exist; and this is the way of the unliteral imagination. Shakespeare, in his way, which is not the way of Dante but a way equally brilliant, is a literalist of the imagination. What is he doing in this first quatrain of Sonnet LXXIII? Let us see first what he is not doing. He is not saying anything about life or about melancholy. He is looking not at life's inexistent leaves but at leaves on a tree, where they belong; and he is not merely pointing to them. His eye roves from a tree that still has its leaves to a bare tree, and then to a tree retaining a few leaves; because all the leaves are yellow we know that the season is late autumn or winter. But the activity of the moving eye gives the image its literal base. The metaphorical meaning of the passage—I. A. Richard's tenor—is nowhere asserted; it is completely fused with the vehicle, with the medium conveying it. I daresay Samuel Johnson, a critic who liked detachable meanings independent of their metaphorical vehicle, or meanings merely suggested by the metaphor as an attention-getting device, would not have liked Sonnet LXXIII; but we cannot be sure because

he admired Shakespeare in perhaps the greatest essay ever written on this poet.

Johnson at any rate did not live long enough to have an opinion of two famous lines from "Ode to the West Wind"; perhaps we ought to be glad that he was spared the onus of an opinion. These are the lines:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

Everybody knows the entire poem, and will agree with me that to take the lines out of their context is to make them into a sitting duck. Shelley was a great lyric poet who persuaded himself that he was a great philosophical poet whose message came first. If the message came first, what came second? The poetry itself. If I shall seem to be carping, let me remind myself that I could carp at Sonnet LXXIII till doomsday, and Sonnet LXXIII would still be there: it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on analytical tempests and is never shaken.

Shelley was looking at a tempest, or at any rate a high wind, and he tells us that he was shaken, but wanted to be shaken more, even picked up by the west wind and dropped somewhere else, but just where he doesn't quite know. When he asks to be lifted as a wave, or a leaf, or a cloud, we get a kind of constation of the imagery which has been developed with considerable power in the three preceding stanzas. Shelley's project of becoming a wave or a leaf, or even a cloud (clouds were perhaps somewhat more within his reach), must seem philosophically untenable, perhaps slightly beneath human dignity. Be that as it may, I am puzzled by the correlation of the three phenomena, and by the omission of the seeds which in the first stanza are being carried by the wind to germinate somewhere next spring. Waves, leaves, and clouds do not contain a principle of organic reproduction. Is Shelley telling us that he would rather be dead, after the exhilaration of being borne by the wind, than to fall upon the thorns of life? I am not sure he meant this; I am not sure what he meant; I am not sure that Shelley was sure what he meant. And where did the thorns come from? I am not much of a botanist but I believe I have heard that certain trees and shrubs produce thorns, the teleology of which is to protect them from foraging animals, and even from man, who because of the thorns is slowed down

in his predatory activity of plucking a rose. Is it not difficult to visualize a rose growing on life? Some people do think that life is rosy, but this is not a very distinguished epithet for the phenomena under consideration; nor is the insight offered us in the proposition, Life is thorny, more distinguished. The elementary irony to the effect that life is both rosy and thorny seems not to have been entertained by Shelley. Does he not say elsewhere that he could lie down like a tired child and weep away the life of care? About thirty years ago I wrote some animadversions on Shelley's thorns of life, and was reproached years later by a good Shelley scholar for not taking into account the fact that when Shelley wrote "Ode to the West Wind" he was worried about the health of his little boy. One never knows just when Xanadu will suddenly reappear; almost any road will get us there.

The sitting duck has not been fired at; we have only located him. It is perhaps not necessary to shoot; the charge and the size of shot are the same that we fired at my romantic revision of Shakespeare's great line. There is no vehicle for Shelley's melancholy, or for his frustration; the thorns, like rabbits, pop out of the hat, and they have no literal location. I am at a loss to see how the thorns could be reworked into a literal vehicle for Shelley's nebulous tenor. It was easy to turn Shakespeare into Shelley; but it would be impossible to turn Shelley into Shakespeare. It is easier to debase a precious metal than to convert dross into gold.

As I approach the end of this discussion I hesitate to make generalizations about modern poetry, because I am not sure where modern poetry begins. One might guess that no poet of genius comparable to Shelley's in the seventeenth century could have written lines as bad as Shelley's humanitarian zeal often allowed him to write. (If it were a purpose of this discussion to be fair, I could cite good lines by Shelley.) A possible inference from what I have said might lead to the conclusion that modern poetry begins at the moment poets lost control of the literal significance of their metaphors. Poets have always done this, even some of the best poets in moments of fatigue. Yet it seems to me that at present, and since what we call the modern movement began early in this century, it has become almost impossible for a poet to find literal images

that will not merely point to a paraphrasable meaning, but will actually contain the meaning. Mr. John Crowe Ransom told us many years ago that the best metaphysical poets *meant their metaphors*. My gloss on this observation is that the paraphrase was not necessary, nor even possible; likewise with all good poetry. If we think we are paraphrasing LXXIII by saying that the poet, or lover, is getting old, or that he is pretending that he is, and is beseeching his friend or mistress not to desert him because death will soon part them, then we are deluding ourselves: this "paraphrase" could be made of some two or three thousand other poems as the common denominator reducing them all to zero.

If the generalization suggested in the foregoing remarks can be entertained as a possible hypothesis (not a theory), without support of sufficient argument or quotation, I should like to offer an even more tenuous abstraction of the metaphysical order; I should hope that it might point towards the causes of our failure to see identities in dissimilars. Aristotle mentioned the power to see *resemblances* in dissimilars as the mark of genius. By the time we get to Donne the resemblance is so close as to become an identity. When Donne says that he is of "the first nothing the elixir grown," he is not saying that he is *like* the first nothing; he is saying that he *is* more nothing than the first nothing, an elixir of the *prima materia* of the alchemists; or if we wish to give this outrageous metaphor a more dignified historical origin we may see in it the Platonic *Me On*, the postulated matter which does not exist until form creates it.

But what I have said about "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucie's Day" is not Donne's poem. I have dissociated Donne's sensibility into two parts, thought and feeling—thought being the tenor and feeling the vehicle. Or is this the right way to describe my own outrage committed upon Donne's? The conceit of the "first nothing" is not *feeling*, and whatever it may be it is not joined with thought; nor is it the mere vehicle of thought. Some forty years ago Mr. Eliot was the first critic to warn us that something had gone wrong with our metaphors but his word *sensibility* must surely have misled us: from what was sensibility dissociated? Thought, doubtless; but one cannot discern, in Sonnet LXXIII, thought as distinct from feeling, or discern a thought-feeling

complex. What one discerns, with our blunt tools, is poetry, which we constantly try to talk about as if it were something else.

But if we still find useful the idea of dissociation, I suggest that what was dissociated—whenever it may have been dissociated—was not thought from feeling, nor feeling from thought; what was dissociated was the external world which by analogy could become the interior world of the mind.

Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

The doctrine of analogy, or connaturality, becomes in poetry the actuality of the identity of world and mind. Would this not indicate the kind of difficulty we encounter when we try to find a meaning in Shakespeare's sonnet apart from his metaphor?

For some implications of my modified version of Mr. Eliot's theory of dissociation I am indebted to Father William F. Lynch's brilliant and neglected book, *Christ and Apollo*. Father Lynch's theological approach to the matter of dissociation suggests the reason, at our particular moment of history, why the dissociation has taken place. Father Lynch's theory, oversimplified, is that we are alienated from nature; that we circumvent the common reality and reach for transcendental meanings; that we use this revived Manichean heresy to justify our hatred of ourselves—a hatred that may express itself evasively in impossible attempts at human perfectibility, at the expense of human reality, or in disgust with the human condition. Shelley's nebulous metaphor of life as thorns might give us a clue to the moment of dissociation in modern poetry. Bad poets have always been dissociated; but when a poet of Shelley's genius falls into dissociation, may we see a landmark in the history of poetry?

I, too, dislike it; and so I come back to Miss Moore, whose fine poem entitled "Poetry" begins with that statement. Is it not absurd to say that one loves poetry? To say that is to say that one loves all poetry—as indiscriminate a love as the love of all women. Yet it is reasonable to prefer all women to horses. I prefer all bad poems to all good socio-

logical tracts. But that is not the question. We must distinguish great poetry from the egotistical sublime (Wordsworth's style) and from Godwin-Methodism (Shelley's style). And we must not fall into the historical trap where, immobilized, we apply a doctrine of historical determinism to poets, and pretend that after a certain date a certain kind of poetry could not be written. I fell into the trap thirty-five years ago when I said that after Emerson had done his work, the tragic vision was henceforth impossible in America. I am glad to have been proved wrong. The poetry of the older generation of T. S. Eliot (or a great part of it), or of John Crowe Ransom, would prove me wrong if I wanted to think that all had gone wrong since Shelley. Here is a passage by a poet younger than Eliot and Ransom:

His suit was brushed and pressed too savagely;
 one sleeve was shorter than his shirt, and showed
 a glassy cufflink with a butterfly
 inside. Nothing about him seemed to match,
 and yet I saw the bouillon of his eye
 was the same color as his frayed moustache,
 too brown, too busy, lifted from an age
 when people wore moustaches. On each lash,
 a tear had snowballed. Then he shook his page,
 tore it to pieces, and began to twist
 and trample on the mangle in his rage.

The lines conclude Robert Lowell's great poem "The Severed Head." John Donne would have understood it, and so I think would Keats.